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Venice Beach hotel owner pleads not guilty in homeless poet's shooting death

By JAVIER PANZAR, JOSEPH SERNA and MATT HAMILTON SEP 01, 2015 | 10:51 PM



The sounds of reggae and crashing waves at a Venice Beach homeless encampment were swiftly eclipsed by an argument, and later, gunfire.

When the shooting stopped Sunday morning, Jascent-Jamal Lee Warren, a homeless poet known as Shakespeare, lay dead and a second man in his 40s was wounded in the leg.

On Tuesday, Los Angeles County prosecutors charged Sris Sinnathamby, the owner of a beachfront hotel near the homeless encampment, with one count of first-degree murder, contending that the 54-year-old initiated the killing.

In a South Bay courtroom, Deputy Dist. Atty. Kristin Trutanich said Sinnathamby "aided, abetted and directed" the deadly shooting, even if he didn't pull the trigger. Arguing for \$5-million bail, Trutanich said the Sri Lankan native posed a flight risk.

Sinnathamby pleaded not guilty. His attorney, Alan Jackson, acknowledged Sinnathamby was involved in a verbal dispute outside his Cadillac Hotel but that an unidentified gunman was the actual perpetrator.

L.A. County Superior Court Judge Keith Schwartz set bail at \$1 million and ordered Sinnathamby to surrender his passport and wear an electronic monitoring device.

Police, meanwhile, have not acknowledged that a second suspect remains at large, saying only that the investigation into the case is ongoing.

In the days since the shooting, flowers, candles and photos have formed a memorial near where the slain poet died along the boardwalk.

Outside Sinnathamby's pink-and-turquoise hotel near Ocean Front Walk and Dudley Avenue on Tuesday morning, Kiva Blount recounted what led up to the shooting.

Blount was preparing her bed in the seaside encampment about the time the bars closed, and she said she heard Sinnathamby shout at a homeless man near the boardwalk.

"I don't know what happened, but he snapped," Blount said.

Warren, whose facility with words earned him the nickname Shakespeare, tried to intervene and ease the tension.

At some point, another man, who had a gun, approached Sinnathamby, and the hotel owner used a racial slur.

The gunman began shooting at the crowd of mostly black homeless people, Blount and another witness said. The gunman fired several shots and stopped to reload, she said.

"He was shooting like a madman," Blount said, adding that the gunman fled in a dark SUV.

When the shooting stopped, she tied a T-shirt tourniquet around the wounded homeless man's leg, she said. When she turned to Warren, he was already died, Blount said.

Sinnathamby was arrested shortly after 8 a.m. at the LAPD's Pacific Division station, according to arrest records.

Mariah Magomedova, 29, was cleaning the memorial Tuesday morning as tourists ambled by.

She recalled how Warren was the first person to offer her help when she arrived at Venice Beach in May, newly homeless, from Tennessee. He showed her how to navigate the often intimidating community, helping her find bus tokens, clothes and other aid.

"He was uplifting," she said. "He was dedicated to peace and offering spiritual support to anyone he met."

She and others at the vigil said they weren't familiar with Sinnathamby.

The hotel owner and his staff weren't known for treating the homeless poorly, some said.

Magomedova said Warren slept on the streets but held a day job.

He posted his music to social media, hoping to one day be signed to a record label.

"In the process of working it out," he said in one song posted online, "but it feels like life's ills got it out for me."

Times staff writer Ruben Vives contributed to this report.

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Joseph Scrna is a Metro reporter who has been with the Los Angeles Times since 2012. He previously worked for papers in Orange County and Signal Hill, a 2.2-square-mile city surrounded by Long Beach. He was part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News for coverage of the 2015 San Bernardino terrorist attack and is a graduate of California's community college and Cal State systems.



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Matt Hamilton is a reporter in the Metro section for the Los Angeles Times. He has covered legal affairs, crime and breaking news across California. He joined The Times in 2013 as an intern reporting on criminal trials in Los Angeles County. Hamilton was part of the team of reporters that received a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino. He grew up in Delaware and studied Catholic theology at Boston College. Before completing a degree in Journalism at the University of Southern California, he edited magazines in Amman, Jordan.

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